

ALPINE SNOWJOURN

Take a passage through mountain passes
and discover Japan's off-piste playground.

Words and photography **Lynn Gail**

A Japanese macaque bathes in the waters
of Jigokudani Monkey Park's hot spring.



Icicles hang from pine trees in the Japanese Alps.

THE heavy-laden alpine trees creak and crack before their dead, brittle branches give way and thud into freshly fallen snow. The wallop echoes through the trees, slicing the silence in Japan’s Aokigahara Forest. I sense someone is there, but when I turn it’s just me and my guide, Také, who’s standing next to me like a protective beacon in his fluorescent orange jacket. He seems to realise something I don’t; a knowing expression is pinching the corners of his mouth. Again I jump when more snow dumps from the trees, dusting our beanies in a layer of powder-white flakes. Still, there’s an indescribable darkness.

Také tells me Mt Fuji’s Aokigahara forest, in Yamanashi Prefecture, is also known in Japan as the Suicide Forest. People suffering with mental illness make the journey, knowing it’s unlikely they’ll be found in the thick forest – their Buddhist beliefs tell them they’ll be reincarnated. There are even signs along the pathways. “Your life is a precious gift from your parents,” states one. “Please reconsider.” I note the first three letters of the forest’s name – AOK – and wonder if it’s a coincidence.

I’m here in April with Wendy Wu Tours on the company’s Trails of Japan dossier. At this time of year, it’s almost unheard of to have snow. In the forest, there is no background din, only the crunch of compacting snow under foot as we round each bend and come across fresh, untrodden trails. Also dubbed the Sea of Trees, the dense forest is as eerie as it is magical, and the afternoon passes in a reflective mindfulness at being able to enjoy the crisp, energising mountain air.

It’s been a day of firsts, including trekking the base of Mt Fuji and sitting cross-legged on soft plump pillows at a ryokan for a kaiseki feast. Each of the delicately sliced beef, raw seafood and julienne-style vegetable dishes is so artistically designed it looks too good to eat. And the dishes keep coming at the hands of demure, kimono-clad waitresses until I can’t possibly eat any more. At night, I feel as though I’m camping inside as I bed down and drift off on a softly stuffed futon placed on a tatami mat floor.

At dawn, a misty Mt Minobu tempts me to walk through its tiny deserted village before heading to one of Japan’s most famous castles. I stroll past vending machines stocked with hot beverages and closed cafes displaying their menus by way of *sampuru* (plastic food models) in outdoor cabinets. It’s a complete contrast to entering the foreboding and busy interior of Matsumoto Castle two hours later. Also nicknamed the Crow



Although not one to normally worry about heights, my heart thumps in my chest a few times as we jerk precariously and rise rapidly on a steep gradient.

The steep rise of the Shin-Hotaka Ropeway.



Views across Matsumoto Castle's grounds and the ancient town.



A hidden Buddhist shrine atop the Alps.



Samurai warrior at Matsumoto Castle.

Castle because of its black six-storey exterior, the structure – dating back to 1594 – is now a national treasure. It's easy to understand why. This magnificent fortress exudes power and is spectacular against the snow-capped Japanese Alps. I clamber up narrow steep staircases to reach the sixth floor and learn the castle was painted black to instil fear among the enemy. Lookouts are positioned on each compass point, allowing a bird's-eye view of the castle's extensive grounds and blossoming cherry trees. In the distance, a labyrinth of ancient thin streets is juxtaposed with the manicured castle grounds.

Také is all smiles as we leave the flatlands of the castle behind and head towards Nagano, the main gateway to the Japanese Alps. It seems he's been communicating with the weather gods as it's snowing in Jigokudani Park, home to the Japanese macaques – aka the snow monkeys. The park is the only known place in the world where monkeys bathe in natural hot springs. When I'd checked the weather before travelling to Japan, sun symbols dominated the charts. I'd had visions of the macaques sunbathing and running amok in spring temperatures. I mutter a 'let there be falling snow' mantra, feeling like a wanting child praying their to-die-for present is under the Christmas tree.

Blue skies peel away and the terrain transforms as we hug rising switchback roads to reach the colossal jagged mountains of Hakuba. We arrive in Yokoyu River Valley, 850 metres above sea level, to gently falling snow. Sudden bursts of steam shoot from the harsh craggy cliffs as we half run along slender paths, overly excited to see the monkeys in their natural environment.

When we finally see them, a family of macaques is huddled in the hot spring, grooming one another as snow falls around them and melts on

the steamy surface. Their red faces peek out, exposed to the cold, as the dominant male scans the mountains for gatecrashers from lower ranking groups. I learn females stay in their family group, while males seek out other packs before they sexually mature. In many respects, their social system is like ours. Také tells me outsiders who come down from the mountains are often pushed out by the main gang or the boss of the pack. The head honcho protects his females, which in return bodes well for him during mating season.

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It would be easy to watch their playful antics until dusk, but two hours pass quickly and it's time to leave the monkeys soaking in the warmth. Having ticked off a wish-list experience, I stroll down through the park and wonder why Jigokudani is also known as Hell Valley when, above, celestial snow-tipped pine trees glow like giant candles.

As dusk edges day's end, the sun's fading rays pierce low-lying clouds, casting a sliver of golden light across the Alps. I feel like a snow monkey that night as I bare all to immerse myself in an onsen and enjoy one of Japan's most popular pastimes. The mineral-infused water soon takes away any inhibitions as I slip into deep relaxation. Then a group



Macaques taking a dip in the hot springs.



Edo-period store selling street food in Takayama's old town.

of middle-aged Japanese women surrounds me, checking me out. “Where you from?” one asks. I tell them Australia. “Oh, Ooorstraaylia,” they repeat, nodding and laughing. “How old you?” I answer, and again they find this funny. I feel like one of those snow monkey outsiders coming down the mountain, but the humorous pidgin English continues for the next 30 minutes, with us sharing details about our ages and health regimens. Being naked grants a sense of freedom that clothes seem to inhibit.

“This is the lucky, unexpected tour,” Také announces the next morning as we head to the peaks of Mt Hotaka, Japan’s third-largest mountain, to ride the Shin-Hotaka Ropeway. With an elevation of 1000 metres, it’s the highest and longest cable car in Japan. “Unexpected snow, late-blossoming cherry trees, and now a two-metre snow drift on top of the Alps,” Také continues as we board, clearly excited. “In seven years I’ve never seen this.”

A sudden jolt signifies our double-decker gondola has begun its 200-metre ascent on the first climb up the Alps’ northern side. Within seconds we’re gliding on a single cable ropeway, skimming treetops to reach the first landing. Keen to get to the summit, no one stops at the midway-point art gallery and gift shop, instead heading straight to the second

departure platform. The gondola spasms into motion as we begin the steep 800-metre climb to the upper station. Although not one to normally worry about heights, my heart thumps in my chest a few times as we jerk precariously and rise rapidly on a steep gradient. With the operator back at the embarkation point, it feels as though we’re flying in a bus without a driver.

At 2156 metres I step out to look across a dazzling valley of snow-drenched pine trees. I feel as though I’m a small child again. I want to dive into the snow, make snow angels and build a snowman with a carrot nose and a hat. I marvel at nature’s ability to take the breath away – and not just because the temperature is –6°C. I walk down a path cut into snowdrifts taller than me and unexpectedly find a Buddhist shrine. It’s a moment where anything seems possible and everything feels right.

On the descent, the landscape appears different, as though someone has flipped the next image across on a moving slideshow. It could still take its place on a postcard, but after exploring Hotaka’s spectacular peaks, it just doesn’t compare.

In the late afternoon I wander the streets of Takayama’s old town, where the distinctive smell of freshly brewed sake infuses with the crisp early-evening air. I pop in and out of

ancient merchant stores clad with dark wooden facades selling strong coffee and delicately wrapped Japanese candies. I sample sweet-smelling street food and end the day sitting under drooping cherry blossom branches, where late buds fall like snow, covering the pavement in a soft blanket of pink and white.



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